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ABSTRACT

This brief report on a visit to Athabasca University, a distance education institution in Alberta (Canada), and ACCESS-Alberta, an educational communications system, indicates the numbers and types of courses offered by the University, and describes the types of media used in the program. These types of media include: print-based, telephone tutoring and teleconferencing, television, radio, audiocassettes, and computer-assisted instruction. Persons involved in course design and services offered by the Academic Computing Services are also indicated, as well as research and development activities at the new Centre for Distance Education. Finally, the ACCESS-Alberta educational communications system is briefly described. An appendix contains the schedule followed during the visit. (EW)

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REPORT ON VISIT TO ATHABASCA UNIVERSITY AND ACCESS-ALBERTA

- A.W.Bates -

Athabasca University (AU)

Introduction

AU is situated two hours' drive north of Edmonton. It was created in 1970 to be an undergraduate, degree-granting university, and currently produces around 50 graduates a year. It has approximately 14,000 course registrations and 10,000 individual students, about 50 full-time academic staff out of a total of approximately 250 full-time staff, and an annual budget from the Provincial Government of Alberta of about C$20 million (£10 million). It serves students not only in the province of Alberta (75%), but also other parts of Canada (including over 1,000 in British Columbia). AU courses are used in several other distence education institutions, such as OLI and North Island College in British Columbia, and Deakin University in Australia.

Courses

AU currently offers nearly 150 different courses, a number of which are bought in from other institutions and adapted. 80% of the courses are worth three credits and the rest six credits. The courses lead to Batchelor Degrees in three programmes: Administrative Studies; General Applied; and Liberal Studies, which contains by far the most courses, and is further sub-divided between Humanities, Science (which includes Mathematics) and Social Science. A degree requires the completion of 90 credits, equivalent to a three year degree programme. This means that five AU three credit courses are roughly equal to one British Open University full credit. In terms of Open University full credit equivalency, then, AU offers about 35, compared with the UK OU's 87. There is also though an extensive system of credit transfer, enabling students to use courses studied either part-time or full-time at other Canadian institutions towards their degree qualifications.

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Media

AU's teaching is primarily print-based, making considerable use of courses 'wrapped around' existing text books, although there are other courses designed from scratch. Printing is designed and produced in-house, usually in one colour, except for covers, which are usually two-coloured. The in-house facilities are also used for designing and publishing non-course materials, such as calendars and publicity material.

There are just under 200 part-time tutors (some of whom also hold full-time positions at Athabasca). The great majority of courses are supported by telephone tutoring. Students may call their tutor toll free from any part of Canada. It was reported though that in most cases, only about 10-15% of the students used the toll-free telephone service, the student usually initiated the contact, and discussion was mainly about administrative rather than learning issues. Such calls were costing the University approximately $15,000 a year in line charges. In addition, students usually have to submit at least two essay-type questions and/or a number of 'quiz' type assignments, as well as a final examination at the end of each course. Several courses, especially in Social Science, make extensive use of telephone quizzes.

As well as two regional offices in Edmonton and Calgary, and an AU centre at Fort MacMurray, there is also an extensive network of about 60 local centres, usually located in other educational institutions, including centres in the Yukon, North-West Territory and Saskatchewan. The local centres offer a variety of services, including teleconferencing facilities, audio-visual replay equipment, registration, counselling, study space, and computer terminals.

Regular face-to-face seminars and/or teleconferencing (once every two weeks) are available on six courses (introductory financial accounting (S) and (T); biology; administrative principles (T); small business management (T); administrative law (S); psychology of the infant (T)). Teleconferencing has been cut back recently for financial reasons, although it was reported that drop-out rates for teleconference supported courses are far less than those of other courses. Several other courses, particularly but not exclusively in Science, require attendance at lab classes or face-to-face workshops.

Six courses (Cultural anthropology; French for Beginners; Understanding

the Earth; World War II; Technology and Change) are supported by television courses broadcast by ACCESS on cable and satellite. All these programmes have been bought in by ACCESS and are in most cases associated with 'telecourses' which already include the support print material. These programmes are also available as video-cassettes. In addition, three other courses have programmes available only on video-cassette, which students can borrow. No programmes have been made specially for courses originally designed by Athabasca University.

Nine courses (three drama, three French, and three music) have accompanying radio programmes, broadcast by the ACCESS radio station CKUA. Again, all programmes have been bought in (the French programmes for instance from BBC CE).

24 courses have audio-cassettes issued as part of the course, and in addition copies of radio programmes are also available, and can be borrowed from AU.

There is no budget for the production or acquisition of television or radio programmes. There are facilities for copying audio cassettes, and an audio studio on campus which is used both for audio recording and for teleconferencing. ACCESS purchases and distributes the television and radio programmes used by AU without charge to AU. In most cases, the broadcasts are supplementary to and not always closely integrated with the print material. There are no utilisation figures.

Five computer science courses require students to have access either to an Athabasca University microcomputer or terminal (available in between two and six of the local centres) or to have their own micro/terminal and hard-copy printer. A variety of programming compilers are needed across the different courses, so students studying several computer science courses are unlikely to use their own micro for all such courses. In addition, an administrative course has computer-assisted learning materials in support of the print material, for students who can access the university's microcomputer labs in Edmonton and Calgary. There is also a full non-credit bought-in CAL course in Legal Accounting, which is accessed by law students from across the province using public dial-in lines. AU's Academic Computing Service is also developing its own writing skills CAL package.

Course design

Course design is determined primarily by the internal full-time academic staff. Instructional designers were originally in a separate department, but worked on course teams. Following a re-organisation several years ago, the separate department was disbanded, and instructional designers were located within the academic areas. This apparently did not work satisfactorily, either. The instructional designers claim that their skills were not properly used by the academics, who reduced their role to dealing with relatively trivial aspects of course design. Consequently, they have now been withdrawn from the academic areas, and are now located in the newly created Centre for Distance Education. It was claimed that there is now very little input to course design from the instructional designers. For instance, there are no norms for the amount of time a student needs to study or for the length of courses. These matters are decided by the academic staff solely on the grounds of desired academic content. There is no system of external assessment or external examiners. There are also no firm scheduling procedures for delivery of drafts for production.

It was reported, from several sources, that completion rates per course were around 35% on average, and that continuation rates to higher level courses within the same programme were around 10%.

Computing services

The Academic Computing Services is responsible for maintaining the network of terminals and micros located in local centres and linked to the mainframe computer at Athabasca. It has also developed a highly sophisticated, useful, and relatively user-friendly computerised student monitoring system called TRIX. The system allows co-ordinators and tutors to enter their own information about course grading systems and individual student grades, to up-date or amend student information, and obtain reports of student (and tutor) progress and performance. Tutors can request the system to flag individual students according to parameters set by the tutor (e.g. no contact for six weeks). The system also indicates when payments have been made, and allows comparison of grades between different tutors. Data is available both as a screen display or can be hard-copied. In other words, co-ordinators can manage and monitor course information, tutor and student progress, and tutors can monitor students, and compare their own performance with other tutors' The software is based on UNIX, but could be converted to run on VMS. There is also growing

interest in the potential of computer conferencing and communications partly as a result of a recent appointment of an educational computing specialist from the University of Guelph who was active in the development of the COSY system, which is also available on the Athabasca University computer. 90% of faculty have terminals on their desk and many regularly use electronic mail and word-processing. A further sixty tutors have been provided with work-stations in their homes, and it is intended to bring all tutors on-line shortly.

Research and development

The recently established Centre for Distance Education comprises seven academic staff, most of whom were previously involved with instructional design and research at Athabasca. Its remit is both to conduct research in the field of distance education and to develop a graduate programme in open learning and distance education. It has recently received a grant of $1.5 million from the Federal Government to develop a distance education course for instructors, based on the Centre's approach to instructional design. Centre staff are also acting as consultants to the School Boards' of Trustees, regarding the decentralisation of delivery and possible introduction of other technology than print for the Alberta Correspondence courses for school-children. The Centre is also conducting a series of projects into enrolment data and tutoring practices at AU. It is not now however directly involved in the design or evaluation of AU courses.

Lastly, several staff members seemed confident that any proposed Centre or institute for Commonwealth Co-operation in Open and Distance Learning will be based in Alberta, and probably at AU.

ACCESS-Alberta

ACCESS is an educational communications system funded by the Provincial Government of Alberta. It now has an extensive cable and satellite television network, covering 69% of homes in Alberta. It has an estimated total weekly viewing audience of over 500,000. ACCESS also operates a radio station (CKUA), with just under 150,000 listeners. It also provides an extensive video, audio and computer disk copying service for schools and colleges in Alberta. ACCESS's total budget is around $20 million.

ACCESS has funds both for distribution and programming. Over half of the programming is bought in, but there are also funds for original programme

production. It covers the full range, from pre-school to adult continuing education.

To date, while ACCESS has bought in programme series that have been used with AU courses, it has not produced material specifically to accompany AU courses. AU is represented on a committee of formal educational institutions, but has no special relationship with ACCESS. ACCESS has approximately $800,000 (marginal costs) available for programming in the formal adult education area, but has not been overwhelmed by good proposals from the education sector in general, or AU in particular.

Part of the problem is the delay and bureaucratic procedures required to acquire programme production resources, which can take up to two years. A more serious problem is the lack of contact between individual academics at AU and individual producers at ACCESS. In particular, there is a lack of contact between individual producers and academics. This means that television or radio are hardly ever considered at the start of course design at AU, and in the relatively few instances where television or radio is used, this has usually been because ACCESS has acquired programming which happens to be relevant to a particular course, but which is not necessarily integrated with the print material. For instance, there are often no references to the television or radio material in the printed texts. Despite the availability of free production and distribution resources, AU has not taken advantage of the potential of broadcasting.

In addition, production staff at ACCESS have a very heavy production load, and there is increasing presssure from senior management to reach larger audiences with popular programming (i.e. series of broad general interest) at the expense of specifically targeted programming.

ACCESS has, like most public institutions in Alberta, entered a period of financial restraint, and is actively looking to increase its income through public appeals, etc.

Despite these difficulties, ACCESS is keen to enter into collaborative production with AU, and is also interested in co-production and commissioned production from educational agencies outside the province. ACCESS is involved currently with co-production with the BBC of programmes for a British Open University geology course.

Appendix A

Programme during visit to Athabasca University and ACCESS-Alberta

Monday, 23rd March	Drive from Edmonton to Athabasca with Educational Media Specialist (Janice Picard)
	Visit with Head of Media Services (Paul Nedza) tour of print design and production facilities, and audio/teleconferencing facilities, plus lunch
	Seminar on computer assisted learning and computer communications with 12 AU staff
Tuesday, 24th March	Lecture on "Use of Media in Distance Education" to 18 AU staff
	Visit with Academic Computing Services (Peter Holt) to see demonstration of student monitoring system (TRIX) and CAL package for Legal Accounting
	Visit with staff of Centre for Distance Education
Wednesday, 25th March	Discussion with Judith van Duren and Gail Crawford on technology support for Alberta Correspondence School students
	Drive from Athabasca to Edmonton with Janice Picard
	Lunch with Chuck Shobe, Michael Piumb and Margaret Meade, ACCESS
	View examples of ACCESS productions
Thursday, 26th March	Presentation on the effective use of television in education, to 18 ACCESS staff
	Individual discussions with 5 ACCESS production

	staff
	View "Homework Hotline", with producer Michelle Boniface
Friday, 27th March	Lead joint AU/ACCESS meeting (15 people) on possible co-operation between ACCESS/AU
	Meet with Michael Plumb and Barry Fisher to discuss planning and research
	Visit West Edmonton Mall